

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

Faith Coxe Bailey

Copyright © 1962

by ZONDERVAN PUBLISHING HOUSE GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Chapter 12

Search for Acceptance - JOE LIGHTFOOT

ANY psychologist will tell you that some people subconsciously want to be punished. They act in ways that are sure to bring them punishment. And they do this because of old, hidden guilts. The buried guilt of these people demands to be punished. Subconsciously, they seek punishment for it.

Some of them feel unworthy of happiness, and they avoid it by the sort of behavior that will wreck a marriage, or make it almost unendurable.

Some feel unworthy of success and carefully blunder just as they are within a single step of becoming successful. Or others, wanting the oblivion of death but fearing to die, may act out again and again the symbolic death of an alcoholic stupor.

Joe Lightfoot was one of these guilt-haunted people. As a boy, Joe was quiet, living too much within himself. He took himself very seriously. Quite naturally, he took others seriously, too. Banter was something he just couldn't handle. Girls, then, represented quite a problem.

For instance, to be confronted by a female drugstore clerk was a shattering experience for Joe. So frequently it went something like this. "Let's see, now. I've got shaving soap, stationery, toothbrush. I guess I'd better have a bottle of hair dressing, too. Something with a nice smell to it."

The lithesome brunette behind the counter would look sensuously at him across the vitamin and aspirin display. "We've got just the thing. You must be going on a heavy date. Is she pretty?" The girl would giggle. "I'll just bet you're quite a lady killer."

But the encounter always ended with Joe fumbling for his package, dropping his change, while the girl giggled again, shrugged, and turned away to rearrange the aspirin.

In any exchange like that, Joe was defenseless and he showed it. Naturally, then, he came in for more than his share of teasing.

And the fact that he never seemed able to come up with a suitable retort didn't mean that he

didn't want to. After such an encounter with the girl drug clerk, for example, he might walk away with a red face, but in his own room he was able to stand before the mirror and deliver sparkling repartee.

"Lady killer?" His laugh was a valiant attempt to sound as if he had seen the whole world and was bored with most of it. "Why, baby, you're too young to die," he told the mirror. "I just guess that one would have stopped her cold." He considered his own reflection soberly. "Maybe she wanted a date! That's it. I should have said something like - heavy date? You don't look so heavy to me!"

Handling banter and encountering girls wasn't Joe's only problem. He also had trouble coping with authority and people who represented authority. A schoolteacher, a policeman, a boss - they all gave him an uneasy feeling.

The boss on Joe's first job made him feel that way. Actually, Joe liked the place and he enjoyed his work. Left to himself, he was happy - until the shadow of authority fell on him.

There was the morning, for instance, that Joe was industriously making out invoices when his boss walked in. Joe pushed all the invoices under a stack of files, cleared his throat twice, and said in considerable agitation, "Uh, good morning, Mr. Fitzgerald. I - uh - took care of the work you left on my desk last night."

Fitzgerald had crossed to the other side of the office and was peering into a metal cabinet. In a panic, Joe rattled on, "I - uh - I'll get the Marshall order out right away. First thing. Will that be soon enough?" He reached for the invoices and three files slid off the desk into the wastepaper basket.

Fitzgerald turned away from the cabinet with a deep frown.

"Huh? What's that, Joe? Oh sure. Right away sounds fast enough to me. Only thing I came in for, Joe, was to see if I had another box of cigars left up there on the shelf. I see there aren't any though. Just have to buy some more, I guess." Stooping to retrieve the files, he said, "Terrible habit, Joe. Don't ever pick it up."

"No, sir," Joe said, watching him closely until the door shut behind him. "Nosey old buzzard," he muttered to himself. "Always checking up on me. Suppose he thinks I took his cigars, too. Someday I'll tell him off."

He started to mark up the invoice, but his pencil point broke.

When he threw it down in irritation, it bounced to the floor and rolled under the metal cabinet.

Nervousness in the face of authority, followed by intense hostility - this was the pattern of Joe's behavior. Part of his guilt problem, too, was that he wanted to think he was just a little better and secretly feared that he might be just a little worse. Yet in his treatment of his mother, for instance, Joe was certainly average and perhaps better than most.

Joe's mother was a widow. As soon as he went to work, he did a man-sized job of taking care of

household expenses. In turn, his mother managed a peaceful, orderly home life for her son.

Supper was always ready when Joe arrived home. When he walked in the door, his mother hung up his jacket and asked about the office. Her grasp of the business world was not knowledgeable but her interest was genuine and sympathetic. Evenings were unhurried and predictable.

Like the night that Mr. Fitzgerald had interrupted Joe and the invoices. "I wouldn't even think about it," his mother soothed as she cleared the table. "Land's sakes, you've done nothing to feel guilty about. With a clear conscience, you can look him right in the eye."

"Yeah, Mom," Joe said.

"Now I'll just do up the dishes and - going to walk to prayer meeting with me tonight?"

Joe pushed his chair back and stood up. "Afraid I can't. Told a couple of the fellows at work I'd meet 'em downtown after supper."

His mother ran the water in the sink and coaxed up the suds with her hand. "Well, that's nice," she called over the sound of the water. "I'm glad to see you're making friends so soon."

That night was destined to be a major turning point in Joe's life. His new office acquaintances introduced him to a world he hadn't known - and to a way of losing every shred of self-consciousness. He met them at a Main Street bar.

"You hear that, guys? Joe says he's never had a drink in his life." Joe began to blush. One of the fellows signaled to the bartender. "First time for everything," Buddy told the crowd. "What'll you have, Joe?"

"I - don't guess I know."

"Then let me introduce you to my favorite. Come to think of it, I'll even buy."

Joe was well into his second drink that night before he noticed anything. Then he became aware of a rising sense of being uniquely at ease. The tight feeling in the back of his neck that always gripped him when he was with a crowd eased off. Then he happened to glance into the big mirror on the back of the bar. The face that looked back at him wasn't the same face that he found reflected in store windows. This face was the relaxed, devil-may-care face that he had always seen only in the privacy of his own room. Then realization came to him. The liquor was making him the man he was in his own daydreams.

Suddenly he began to talk to anybody who'd listen, to everybody. And he had a good story to tell, too.

"I was buying some stuff at the drug store and this girl clerk, she says to me, 'You must be going on a heavy date!' You know what I told her? I said, 'You don't look so heavy to me, kid.'" The laughter that followed was mild. "You take her out?" Buddy asked.

"Me? No."

"Too bad. Girls are a good idea. Come to think of it." Joe nodded sagely. "You know something, Buddy? you're right. Girls are a good idea. You know any?"

"A couple, maybe." Buddy winked at the fellows lining the bar. "But I don't know if they could find a friend for you - this late, anyway."

Joe drained his glass and set it down on the counter with authority. "Give 'em a try, Buddy. Give 'em a try."

The rest of the evening - the part that Joe could remember - he was a social ball of fire. So it seemed to him.

Next morning, he was almost an hour late for work.

At noon, his new friends filled him in on the details of the night before. Buddy had taken him home - after he had been sick in the taxi. The girls were not at all impressed. "And by the way, you owe me three-fifty," Buddy informed him. "A buck and a half for your share of the cab bill. And two bucks I gave the driver because you were sick in his cab."

"I see," Joe said solemnly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Here's your money. Listen, I know I goofed things up pretty bad. But let's do it again, huh?"

Buddy grinned. "With a head like you've got, you're ready for more? Okay, we will. But I'd better line up some different girls. You got off to kind of a bad start with those!"

Joe was off to a bad start in more ways than one. Sober, he was shocked by the way he acted when he was drinking.

His remorse, intense with every hangover, increased his burden of buried guilt until it was no longer endurable.

The only way to endure it was to take another drink. The battle, even as it loaded him with new guilt for tomorrow, took him for a few hours into a state in which there was neither guilt, nor self-consciousness, nor sense of inadequacy. Increasingly, the bottle proved the immediate answer for every problem.

If Joe felt the boss was critical, he took a drink. If he was embarrassed by self-consciousness in a social or business situation, he took a few more.

Some men slip downhill gradually. Others plunge into disaster. The more liquor is used as a personality crutch, the more desperate the remorse is after every drinking bout. And the way down goes much faster.

Joe was clearly a fast skidder. In less than four years, he came to the point of complete collapse. He managed to stay out of institutions - but only because of his mother.

His mother stood his abuse when he was drinking. She cleaned up after him when he was sick. She nursed him back to life at the conclusion of every drinking bout. But finally she told him that something had to be done.

"You can't go on like this, son."

"I know - I know." Joe leaned weakly against the pillows, drinking orange juice.

"Son, they wanted to take you away this time. I wouldn't let them. But Joe, I've sat here and just prayed and prayed."

"I'll quit, Mom. I promise. It's no good, I know. I'm ashamed of myself. I want to be different. Don't you know that?"

His mother twisted the corner of his blanket. "Then you'll need more strength than you have. You'll need GOD's strength."

"Lay off it, Mom. I'll take care of this thing my own way."

"I've been praying, son - that you'll ask JESUS CHRIST to take over your life - and save you. Because He'll do it. He's promised."

Joe set the orange juice down on the table beside the bed.

"I'm sick of this stuff. How about some real food?"

With a sigh, his mother stood up. Joe looked at her impatiently and it was then he noticed her arms. They were mottled with black and blue. "Hey, you look like someone's been beating you with a ball bat."

She tried to hide them behind her. "Mom - did I - ah GOD, no!"

What he had done to his mother was increased weight added to Joe's already unendurable load of guilt. Now the intensified guilt frightened him - away from the bottle. He tried hard to quit drinking.

But the months that followed were full of futility. He determined, he promised, he tried - and then he failed. He stiffened his willpower and found it was inadequate. He desperately sought medical help, but discovered that the relief it provided was only temporary. He experimented with quack remedies. They tantalized him and deserted him.

But his mother stuck with him. And she went on praying.

Probably her loyalty only increased his guilt. Yet it encouraged him as well, and he fought against the habit.

But every battle ended in its own kind of miserable failure.

There was no hiding the failures from his mother, and he could plainly see, when he was sober, what they were doing to her.

Toward the end of the year, there was more guilt for Joe to bear. His mother's health seemed to be failing. At first, she protested that she was just tired. Inwardly, Joe chalked it up to her concern for him, and he felt great remorse. But at last there was no doubt about his mother's health. It was gone. It was simply a matter of time, the doctors told him.

Her dying was slow and laborious. Toward the end, Joe spent as much time as possible sitting in the bedroom with her. Within him, the pressure of waiting and of his own guilts kept building up. When that pressure became intolerable, he found some excuse to be away for a few hours. If his mother suspected where he went on those trips, she said nothing about it.

But when Joe came back, he always found it hard to meet her eyes. Knowing his breath would give him away, he tried to stay as far as possible from her bed.

That's the way it was on an evening in early fall. Joe was gone for about two hours. Then he let himself back into the house quietly. But his mother was not asleep. She called out to him.

"Joe, I was so afraid you wouldn't get back in time. It's almost over. Things are getting - dim. Come here, son."

"I can't." Ashamed, he backed away from the bed. "Let me get you some water - fruit juice - anything. I'll call the doctor."

"There isn't time. Just kiss me, Joe."

"Mom, I can't. I can't." From the other side of the room, he stared across at her, hating his own weakness, terrified at the thought that death was as close as she said it was.

His mother said nothing more. Watching her lips move silently, he knew that again she was praying for him. That night she died.

For the next six months, Joe lived a nightmare of fear and remorse and alcohol. Any semblance of orderly living was gone. He remembered his mother and her loyalty and her prayers, and he drank to forget it. He had no job. He spent his time going from one saloon to another.

He was a man haunted by guilt, motivated by its burden, but he had buried completely the reasons for it. They were buried under the seemingly impenetrable wrapping of alcoholism. There was no doubt, Joe had quickly come to the end of the road. He was just another drunk on Skid Row.

Somehow, on a night in March, he drifted in the door of the Pacific Garden Mission. The man who was speaking that night was a stonecutter named Holland Oates. What he said spoke straight to Joe. It went something like this:

"Now what I'm going to tell you is the truth - gospel truth. Just because I'm wearing a decent suit of clothes, some of you men may think I don't know what you're going through."

Joe slouched down in his chair.

"That just isn't so. There isn't a man in this room who's having a tougher fight with himself and with booze than I've had. The fact that I'm standing here and not lying out there in the street - the fact that I'm alive at all - has nothing to do with will power."

Joe straightened up.

Holland Oates went on.

"It's only because my sins have been forgiven. The Lord JESUS CHRIST paid for them in His own blood on the cross. And when my pride was broken to the point where I knew I was helpless and a sinner and asked Him to save me, He did exactly that. Friend, your problem isn't booze. It's sin. The liquor is just a symptom of something that's a thousand times worse - sin. You're a guilty man, and you know it."

Joe put his head in his hands, and moaned to himself softly. "Up to now, it's been easier to stay drunk than to face your sins and acknowledge your guilt," the man on the platform said. "But JESUS says this, **'For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'** Listen, if there's hope in your heart right now, JESUS is calling you. If one word of what I say meets your condition, you're being judged by the HOLY SPIRIT of GOD."

Joe's face was covered now by his grimy hands, but he was nodding.

"If you're dead in sin, you can be alive, in CHRIST, forever. Let's pray together, here and now, and let the Lord JESUS CHRIST set you free."

Joe Lightfoot was on his feet. He shuffled down the aisle and when he reached Holland Oates, he said two words.

"I'm guilty."

"Then praise GOD," Holland Oates told him, "because if you didn't know that, He couldn't do a thing for you."

That night in the "Old Lighthouse" on Skid Row, Joe found release from the guilt that had demanded so long to be punished. All the things that had tortured him - his self-consciousness, his feeling of unworthiness as a human being, his remorse over what he had done to his mother - were brought to the foot of the cross that night. His mother's prayers were answered.

And Joe Lightfoot, the man whose entire life had been blighted by guilt, began to walk free, a new creature in CHRIST.

~ end of chapter 12 ~
